

The Couple Interview as a Method of Collecting Data in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis Studies

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to discuss the couple interview as a method of collecting data in interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) studies. This study was conducted in Gauteng, South Africa, with the aim of understanding the experience of living in an HIV-serodiscordant relationship. Seven HIV-serodiscordant heterosexual couples were interviewed (dyadic interviews). This article provides a brief overview of these HIV-serodiscordant couples, as well as gives reasons for using IPA as a methodology for exploring the experiences of HIV-serodiscordant couples and explains the processes and outcomes involved. This article also presents the strengths of using the couple interview such as obtaining in-depth information and observing couple interaction. This is not possible during an individual interview. During the couple interview, the sitting position, interaction, gender, and power dynamics need to be observed. It is recommended that the interviewers be very skilled and experienced. The interviewers need to manage interactions during the interview and be able to adapt the process according to the participants' cultural practices and preferences. This will improve the use of the couple interview as a data collection method in IPA studies when exploring sensitive issues.

Keywords

couple, couple interview, data collection, HIV-serodiscordant couple, interpretative phenomenological analysis, qualitative research methodology

What Is Already Known?

Interpretative phenomenological analysis is a psychological qualitative research design used to understand participants' subjective realities through personal interpretations of their lived experiences and the meanings they attach to these experiences. The advantage of using the IPA design is that it has phenomenological, an interpretative, a double hermeneutic, and an idiographic nature. Couple interview is one of the qualitative data collection methods that can be utilized in health psychology research designs, such as interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) design. This is because couple interview will assist researcher to interpret and analyze the experiences from both individuals in the relationship. Couple interview was used by few authors using terms such as dyads. However, there is a scarcity of couple interview studies focusing on HIV-serodiscordant couples. Interpretative phenomenological analysis is used frequently in psychological studies focusing mainly on individual interviews. In IPA, the position which is used is mostly SOLER. Counselling skills are necessary in IPA.

What This Paper Adds?

The data using couple interview in interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) studies are adding variation in IPA. The fact that the participants' HIV results are different makes the dynamics in the communication to be very complicated which need advanced interviewing skills. It also specify the adoption of sitting position to ensure maximum participation of both partners while the author is having adequate chance to observe non-verbal communication which should be done. Couple interview do not only allow double hermeneutic but "triple hermeneutic. Using couple interview allow the researcher to

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identify and interpret Interactions between partners such as power dynamics and gender dynamics, which might affect the quality of the relationship which might not be fully identified and observed when interviewing partners individually. Failure to identify and understand the real experiences of the partners in the context of the relationship may affect the provision of relevant support to the couples. The couple interviews may only be conducted at participants' homes only if there are other family members around, or when there is more than one researcher. Privacy, confidentiality and safety of the participants in couple interview are equally important as the safety of the researchers.

Introduction

Data collection methods commonly referred to in qualitative studies are individual interviews, focus group interviews, documentary reviews, and observations. Few researchers document the use of data collection methods where people are interviewed in pairs (Morgan, 2012; Morgan, Ataie, Carder, & Hoffman, 2013). This type of interview where two participants interact in response to an open-ended research questions is called a dyadic or joint interview (Morgan et al., 2013). The dyadic interview can be conducted with any two members who are knowledgeable about the research topic. This may include co-workers, students in the same class, patients, partners, or couples. There are several researchers who conduct dyadic interviews as a method of data collection that focuses on couples (Taylor & De Vocht, 2011). Although dyadic interviews are also used for interviewing couples, the concept "couple interview" is rarely used. Couple interview is one of the qualitative data collection methods that can be utilized in health psychology research designs, such as interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) design. This is because couple interview will assist researcher to interpret and analyze the experiences from both individuals in the relationship. However, data collection methods that are commonly employed in IPA design are individual interviews, focus group interviews, diaries, and documents (Smith, 2007; Smith, Flower, & Larkin, 2009). There is a scarcity of IPA studies that use the couple interview as a data collection method. This article will describe the process of using the couple interview as a data collection method in IPA studies. The process is shared against the backdrop of a study conducted in Gauteng to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of HIV-serodiscordant couples (Mavhandu-Mudzusi, Lelaka, & Sandy, 2014; Mavhandu-Mudzusi & Sandy, 2015). In this article, I provide an overview of HIV-serodiscordant couples, explain modification done to IPA to accommodate the use of couple interview as data collection method, and explain the detailed process of the couple interview in relation to IPA. I also present the complexities of conducting couple counseling and make recommendations to facilitate the use of the couple interview as a data collection technique in IPA for HIV-serodiscordant couples and other couples when exploring sensitive issues.

The term HIV serodiscordant is used in a situation where one of the partners in a stable romantic relationship is infected with HIV and the other is not (Lingappa et al., 2008; Rispel, Cloete, Metcalf, & Moody, 2009). A stable relationship is any sexual relationship where people are staying together for at least more than 3 conservative months. Among people with HIV who are in stable relationships, up to 50% are in serodiscordant relationships (De Walque, 2007). According to the World Health Organization (2012), half of the infected partners in HIV-serodiscordant relationships are males and the other half are females.

However, the proportion of couples in a HIV-serodiscordant relationship differs from country to country. In countries such as Tanzania and Kenya, more than 60% of couples are in serodiscordant relationships. In approximately 30% and 40% of the serodiscordant couples, the infected partner is female (Gitonga, Ballidawa, & Ndege, 2012). Baratedi, Thupayagale-Tsweneagae, and Gamba-Limando (2014) mention that HIV-serodiscordant couples often face challenges including the stress of possible transmission, financial pressures, and coping with HIV-related stigma, all of which may have a negative influence on their relationship. Crankshaw, Mindry, Munthre, Letsoalo, and Maharaj (2014) reported challenges experienced by HIV-serodiscordant couples such as gender-based violence, family breakdown, desertion, and isolation. These are mainly experienced by female partners following disclosure of HIV-positive status to their male partner. Major challenges experienced by HIV-serodiscordant couples are disagreements over sex and blame about bringing HIV into the family, issues regarding procreation, lack of interest in sex, psychological stress, and feeling of being stigmatized as being promiscuous and a risk to the uninfected spouse (Gitonga et al., 2012).

Apart from relationship challenges that HIV-serodiscordant couples experience, there are several misconceptions associated to serodiscordancy, which increase the risk of uninfected person to contract HIV. The misconceptions include the view that HIV being not infectious; it just luck, protection from God; engagement in gentle sex and that the HIV-negative couple member had peculiar protective characteristics. These beliefs and misconceptions contribute to couple to engaging in unprotected sex (Gitonga et al., 2012). These may be the explanation of higher HIV incidence rates of negative partner in the serodiscordant couple which is approximately 10- to a 100-fold higher than relationships where both partners are HIV negative (Rispel, Cloete, Metcalf, Moody, & Caswell, 2012). Serodiscordancy does not only affect the individuals in the relationship but affect the couple's relationship. Interactions between partners such as power dynamics and gender dynamics, which might affect the use precautionary measures to prevent HIV transmission to the uninfected partner, cannot be fully identified and observed when interviewing partners individually. Failure to identify and understand the real experiences of the partners in the context of the relationship may affect the provision of relevant support to the HIV-serodiscordant couples. The motivation to use couple interview to collect data in

research should be clear. In this study, the sensitivity of the topic, and the need to use the IPA design make me to consider the couple interview to be the most relevant data collection method.

Method

Design

I modified IPA design to incorporate couple interview as data collection method. The original IPA design seems to be more suitable for most commonly using individual, face-to-face, semistructured interview as data collection method (Smith & Eatough, 2012; Smith, 2014). However, for this article, partners in HIV-serodiscordant relationship were interviewed together as a couple. This necessitates adapting the IPA design to incorporate couple interview as data collection method.

The rationale for adapting the IPA design to incorporate couple interview as data collection method. IPA is a psychological qualitative research design used to understand participants' subjective realities through personal interpretations of their lived experiences and the meanings they attach to these experiences (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2008; Smith, 2007, 2011). The advantage of using the IPA design is that it has phenomenological, an interpretative, a double hermeneutic, and an idiographic nature (Smith, Flower, & Larkin, 2009, 2013). The *phenomenological* aspects of IPA are that it is concerned with the description of the individual's perceptions of objects or events (Smith & Eatough, 2012). This design aims to offer insights into how a specific individual makes sense of a specific phenomenon in a specific context (Smith, 2007). Central to IPA studies is the individual and how those individuals experience a specific phenomenon, which in this case is being in a HIV-serodiscordant relationship. The emphasis is how the individuals experience the phenomenon, but not how being in the phenomenon affect all the people involved (Smith et al., 2009, 2013). As I wanted to understand how the couples (not the individual partners in the relationship) describe their experience as couple in a serodiscordant relationship, couple interview was considered the best option. The objective for this couple interview was that the participants will describe their experience focusing on how serodiscordant status affects their relationship. This may be impossible in an individual interview where there may be blaming each rather than focusing on the core aspects of the relationship.

The second element that was considered when I chose to use couple interview in IPA was regarding its hermeneutic character. Hermeneutics is a theory of interpretation of textual meaning in techniques used in speaking and writing that divulge the intentions and context of the speaker or writer (Smith et al., 2013). Central to this is that human beings are self-interpreting beings who are able to interpret the events and the experiences they are involved in (Smith & Eatough, 2012). When focusing on an individual interview, there is double hermeneutic where the individual participants are trying to make sense of their

world while the researcher is also trying to make sense of the way in which the individual participants are making sense of their world (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2008). This means that the researchers will focus only on interpreting how an individual partner is interpreting the experience and try to make sense based on what the individual is saying.

As I wanted to understand how couple living in HIV-serodiscordant relationships makes sense of their experience of being in serodiscordancy, couple interview was assumed to be most suitable as it might not only allow double hermeneutic but "triple hermeneutic." Triple hermeneutic is a term I coined which means that it would not only be the researcher trying to interpret the interpretation of the individual partner. There will be a third interpretation where the researcher tries to make sense on how each partner makes sense or interpret the interpretation of the other partner to understand the couple experience of the relationship.

In relation to IPA's interpretative elements, individual interview allows participants to reflect on the impact and significance of their lived experiences (Smith et al., 2009). It allows the researcher to understand participants' subjective realities through based on how individual participants interpret their lived experiences and the meanings they attach to these experiences (Larkin et al., 2008; Smith, 2007, 2011). Griffiths (2009) found that participants' interpretation of their experiences enables researchers to gain access to and understand the individual's world through "interpretative activities." The focus is still individual. As the main focus was not only on interpreting the individuals' experiences in a HIV-serodiscordant relationship but the dynamics in experiences of both individuals as a couple in the relationship, couple interview was considered the most suitable data collection method. Couple interview enabled the researcher to understand each individual's interpretation of experience in their relationship, how each individual interprets the interpretation of another partner in the relationship, and how they both interpret their relationship. Which mean couple interview allowed multiple interpretations that allowed me to have a clear picture of the couple dynamics in their HIV-serodiscordant relationships.

With regard to the idiographic element, IPA enables the researcher to have a detailed and thorough analysis of small cases (Smith et al., 2013). It allows the researcher to focus on the detailed unique experiences of each case in a specific context (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Eatough, 2012). This idiographic nature was important when considering couple interview, though the case was not an individual partner in the HIV-serodiscordant relationship but the couples in the serodiscordant relationship (primary context) who are staying in Soweto (secondary context). In these instances, couple interview was considered most suitable, as I was focusing on understanding the couples in the dual context. Both contexts are very important in IPA, as Larkin, Watts, and Clifton (2008) postulate that IPA do not only focuses on the description of the experiences but extends to interpretation and analysis of how participants make sense of their lived experiences in relation to their social, cultural, and theoretical contexts.

Sampling and Recruitment

As IPA focuses on understanding participants' experiences within a specific context, I focused only on HIV-serodiscordant couples who visited a specific HIV clinic in Soweto Township. Soweto is black urban township situated in Southern Johannesburg, Gauteng Province, South Africa. The name Soweto is an acronym for "South Western Township." It has a population of 1.3 million people, which is predominantly Black from all over South Africa and other African countries. Soweto township is dominated by the poorest people and a pouch of wealthiest people. The township has high unemployment, overcrowding, informal settlements, crime, and poor housing with limited to no services from the government. This socio-economic context make the people in the area to be at high risk of HIV infection.

Recruitment of participants was initiated after receiving ethical clearance and permission to conduct the study from the relevant authorities. Informed consent were also obtained from the participants following explanation of relevant ethical issues such as the purpose of the study, confidentiality, respect, the right to withdraw, the use of an audio-recorder, and possible risk and benefit.

In IPA, homogeneity of participants with regard to characteristics and experience is necessary. The researchers used criterion purposive sampling techniques to recruit participants (Smith et al., 2009). The following preset inclusion criteria were used: Participants had to have been in a stable HIV-serodiscordant relationship for at least 6 months; they had to be staying in Soweto and had to be in the age range of between 18 and 52 years (Mavhandu-Mudzusi et al., 2014; Mavhandu-Mudzusi & Sandy, 2015). The duration of at least 6 months in the relationship was required to ensure that couples have passed the stage of shock and spent sometimes together in the situation to be able to share their experience.

The inclusion criteria were used to ensure homogeneity of the sample in accordance with the research topic. The final sample was composed of seven HIV-serodiscordant couples. The sample size was determined by data saturation. Data saturation is the point at which no new information is obtained during the interview process (Polit & Beck, 2012). This was possible, because in IPA, data collection is done iteratively with data analysis. This number was considered adequate as IPA is more concerned about the detailed accounts of individual experiences rather than the number of participants (Smith & Eatough, 2012). Smith (2007) maintains that reduced participant numbers allow for a richer depth of analysis that might be inhibited with a larger sample. A deeper and more interpretative analysis could be seen as drawing the analyst away from the original meanings, and indeed, Smith (2007) encourages researchers to "go beyond" the apparent content.

Data Collection

Data were collected using couple interview. Couple interview is one of the data collection methods that can be useful in health

psychology especially when the researchers want to gain an understanding of sensitive issues that are pertinent to the couples and may have an impact on the relationship of the couple. Sensitive issues include aspects such as couple's experiences regarding the loss of a child, parenting, adoption, raising a child who is physically or mentally challenged, views regarding a delinquent child, or teenage pregnancy. Couple interview can also be utilized for nonheterosexual couples, teenagers who are in a romantic relationship, people in premarital relationship, or any couple in any form of relationship as long as the focus of research is on the aspects that have an impact on their relationship. The couple interview can also be useful in understanding the dynamics in intergenerational, interracial, interethnicity, interability (the relationship between abled and a person with a disability), or any form of relationship where there is diversity which may have an impact on the relationship. As I wanted to gain an in-depth understanding of the experience of couples in a HIV-serodiscordant relationship, which is sensitive as it might have psychological, economic, sexual, social, health, and economic impact on the relationship of the couple, couple interview was considered the most suitable data collection method. Before data collection, I, together with co-researchers of the main study developed an interview schedule.

Development of the interview schedule. A preset interview schedule with relevant prompts and probes is important in couple interview to avoid being derailed from the core of the interview as the partners may start addressing other issues besides the phenomenon that needs to be explored. The interview schedule was developed to guide and facilitate a natural flow of conversation during the interview process. It was based on steps described in Breakwell (2012). The researchers formulated the questions that were planned to be asked and additionally how the interview would be initiated. One of the researchers conducted a pilot interview with one of the couples from the research site who met the criteria. The interview was initiated with the following question: "Could you please share your experiences of being in an HIV-serodiscordant relationship?" Prompts and probes were used to elicit more response. The interview was audio-recorded. Field notes were taken. After the interview, the interviewer provided a report to co-researchers regarding interaction with the couple. All the researchers listened to the interview and checked the field notes. It was evident that some questions evoked a lot of anger from an HIV-negative partner.

Researchers realized that some questions needed to be modified as the participants were unable to provide relevant responses. Prompts were added to explore the perceptions, feelings, reactions, and participants' interpretation of each reaction and the various responses. Specific probes were also identified to ensure that each couple was asked about more or less similar aspects (see Table 1).

The new schedule was piloted again with two more couples who met the inclusion criteria but were not part of the sample included in the study. Re-evaluation of the interview process

Table 1. Interview Schedule: Sample of Questions and Prompts.

| |
|---|
| 1. Could you please share your personal experiences since your diagnosis as an HIV-serodiscordant couple? <i>Prompt: Can you please tell me what has happened since you discovered that your HIV status is not the same as that of your partner?</i> <i>Use probes for information on the following aspects:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time of discovery of discordant status • How was it discovered? • Reaction to being an HIV-serodiscordant couple • Status of each member |
| 2. What effects does HIV-serodiscordancy have on your relationship? <i>Prompt: Kindly elaborate on how being in an HIV-serodiscordant relationship affects your interaction with each other?</i> <i>Use probes for information on the following aspects:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intimacy • Sexual practices • Relationship (family members, children, society, and religious beliefs) • Plans for family • Support (family members, children, society, and religion) • Future plans |
| 3. What does HIV-serodiscordancy mean to you? <i>Prompt: What is meant by the term "HIV-serodiscordant relationship"?</i> <i>Use probes for information on the following aspects:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge • Meaning of HIV-serodiscordancy • Understanding • Sources of information • Lifestyle modification • Precautionary measures • Adherence to treatment |

Source. Mavhandu-Mudzusi and Sandy (2015, p. 199).

and relevancy of the questions was done through listening to the audio recording and reading the field notes. The researchers were satisfied with the revised interview schedule.

Sitting position. The researchers initial was to use the SOLER technique as described in Egan (2010). SOLER is an acronym for the following:

- S: Sit squarely facing the participant.
- O: Open posture meaning that the interviewer should not cross their legs or arms.
- L: Lean slightly forward toward the participant.
- E: Eye contact with the participant.
- R: Relax, which means that the interviewer should not be fidgeting with any items, or writing field notes.

However, during the piloting of the interview schedule, the researchers realized that the position was not working well as the seating of chairs of the couple were adjacent to each other. When one partner was talking, another partner would just scratch, hand squeeze, or use an elbow as a warning sign or tell that person to stop talking. That led the researchers to modify sitting position from SOLER to TROLER by making sure that the chairs were placed to form a "triangle" instead of square. This position was adopted to ensure that the interviewer

was able to maintain eye contact with both partners and observe nonverbal cues with ease. The triangle setting was also used to create more or less a sense of equality among participants and the interviewer. NB: When conducting couple interview, the culture of the participants regarding the sitting position should be considered, and the researcher should adopt culturally acceptable positions. If it means seating on a mat, the researcher might have to adhere to cultural congruent sitting practices.

Interview process. Couples were interviewed in their residential area at a time and a date found convenient for both partners. Interviewing couples at their home ensure that they were relaxed. They were in their natural environment and that gave them a sense of being respected and in control as knowledge holders. Although it seemed a good idea to interview participants at their own homes, it might be dangerous in case where one of the partners becomes physically aggressive and there is no one who can assist. It is better to conduct interviews where other people can be easily accessed in case the situation becomes unsafe. The couple interviews may only be conducted at participants' homes only if there are other family members around, or when there is more than one researcher. Privacy, confidentiality and safety of the participants in couple interview are equally important as the safety of the researchers. These should be taken into consideration throughout the research process.

For this study, I used TROLER position as the participants were living in an urban township. As the topic is sensitive and has the potential of causing negative emotions that might even lead to physical violence, maintaining the Troller was important to prevent participants from having easy physical contact with each other. I also sat next to the door where it would be easy to open the door and call for help in case the situation got out of hand.

Permission to audio record the interview and to jot down field notes for capturing observations that could not be captured on audio recording such as nonverbal gestures, the interview setting, and the researchers' own impressions was sought from each couple and granted. Apart from discussing general ethical issues (which will be highlighted in the next section), ground rules were set which included respect for each other, not interrupting while the other partner was talking, openly voicing feelings, and avoiding physical violence. Participants in couple interview may reveal secrets and aspects, which the partner might not have been aware of. It may potentially lead to a breakup of the relationship. It is important to ensure that there is always referral services available for counseling.

The key to interviewing while using IPA is the ability to demonstrate empathetic understanding through adopting an insider perspective. This is done through trying to imagine what it is like for the participants to go through whatever they are experiencing. The other important skill is critical hermeneutics that entails the ability to adopt a critical and probing stance led by participants' responses in order to gain meaningful insight into the phenomenon (Smith & Eatough, 2012).

As in this article, the focus was on couples, not only an individual living in a HIV-serodiscordant, advanced interview skills in critical and probing stance is necessary in order to understand the views of both individuals without taking side with any of them. In order to achieve that the interviews were conducted by me, a multilingual South African researcher who is experienced in addressing sensitive issues such as death and dying, teenage pregnancy, gender and sexual diversity, sex and sexuality, and HIV/AIDS among individuals and couples. These experience enabled me to use relevant probes that enable individuals to both share and interpret their experiences.

The IPA design requires the use of counseling skills such as the ability to ask open-ended questions that are nonleading in a sensitive and nonjudgmental manner (Smith, 2014). This is critical in couple interview. Signs of being judgmental may influence the views of the other partner toward a negatively judged partner. This may provoke aspects of negative emotions such as anger, blame, and even aggression. To avoid such situation, couple interview should be conducted by a person who is experienced in conducting an interview and also having advanced counseling and crisis intervention skills. In this study, the interviewer was me because I am skilled and has obtained an honors degree in psychology, HIV counseling, and couple counseling courses. I have more than 15 years of experience of counseling and testing individuals and couples for HIV both at hospital level and institution of higher education.

The interviews were conducted in English as all the participants were able to speak English. Where clarification was sought, the participants' mother tongue was used and later translated into English. The interview was initiated by a conversation about life in general which was then moved to aspects such as family members, children, employment, cultural practices, and religious beliefs in order to build rapport and gain the trust of the participants. These aspects are considered important in using IPA for understanding the experiences of the individual (Smith & Eatough, 2012). The process of building rapport assists in reducing couples' tension and making them more relaxed and ready to discuss more sensitive and confidential aspects.

The interviews were more about living in an HIV-serodiscordant relationship than the life of the individual outside the relationship. I was sensitive to the knowledge and background of the participants and reassured them from time to time about confidentiality and respect for human dignity. Kvale's (1996) guidelines for conducting interviews were used with some adjustment to render it more appropriate for the couple interview.

The first question, requesting them to share their personal experiences since their diagnosis as an HIV-serodiscordant couple, was followed by a prompt. Throughout the interview process and with each question, I carefully and attentively listened without interrupting, thus allowing all partners time to express themselves freely. The focus was on the spoken words, how they were spoken, and also noted what seemed to be said and what was left unspoken. Critical and relevant

probes were used to assist the participants in sharing their experiences and in determining the meaning of those experiences to them. Validation was done through asking related questions to verify observations of nonverbal cues and to avoid wrong assumptions that might have nullified the results. Although there were preset questions and probes, minimal encouragers such as eye contact, pausing, raised eyebrows, and use of words such as "nh . . .," "and then," "do you mind explaining further," and "tell me more about" were also used. This was done to encourage participants to elaborate on their statements, clarify any information, or identify emotions around the topic. The purpose was for the couple to share meaningful and useful information related to the phenomenon under discussion (Smith & Eatough, 2012). These encouragers also assisted the couple in narrating their experiences and to clarify their own views regarding the meaning of those experiences.

Throughout the couple interview, I showed empathy, respect, and nonjudgmental attitudes. During the interview, emotions such as anger, guilt, shame, and blame were displayed. Observations of those emotions and noting them are considered crucial in IPA as they are part of the experiences and also the interpretation of those experiences by participants (Smith, 2014). Each couple was interviewed once and the interviews lasted from 45 to 60 min. However, further 30–60 minutes were used for debriefing and counseling. Debriefing and counseling are necessary for couple interviews to ensure that the participants are left in a good emotional state. As an experienced counselor in the HIV field, I debriefed each couple immediately after interview session and offered initial counseling depending on the urgency and the sensitivity of issues raised, before referral either to the center's psychologist for further counseling or to other providers based on the needs identified. It is necessary for couple interview to be conducted only by the researchers who are experienced in both conducting couple interview and counseling. It is also important that couple interviews be conducted by the person who is knowledgeable or an expert in the field of research focus.

In this study, each couple was interviewed only once. In some instances, follow-up interviews are needed, either with couples if they are able to handle differences or individually in case the researcher has identified the danger signs such as potential verbal or physical abuse or severe power dynamics. As couple interview can be very emotional, it should only be used if it is the only best method to collect data. It should also be used with the focus on using the findings to benefit the individuals in the relationship.

Each audio-recorded interview was transcribed verbatim within 72 hours. Member checking was done twice for each couple to ensure that the collected data yielded a true reflection of the couple interview. The initial member checking was done after data transcription while the second member checking was done after data analysis in order to get a true reflection of each couple. The couple interviews were conducted interactively with data analysis. Although data saturation was reached after interviewing the fifth couple, two more couples were

interviewed to make sure that really there was no new information coming from participants. The couple interviews were discontinued after interviewing the seventh couple.

Data management and analysis. Data were thematically analyzed using Smith's (2005) IPA framework for data analysis. Guba and Lincoln's (1994) framework of trustworthiness, which includes five criteria: credibility, dependability, confirmability, transferability, and authenticity, was utilized to ensure rigor of the study. These processes will be discussed thoroughly in the next paper as it was not the purpose of this article.

Strengths of Using the Couple Interview

The couple interview assists partners in a relationship to share issues, which they normally cannot discuss when interviewed individually. It creates a safe space for partners to share their experiences and emotions without being judged. Partners are able to complement each other and also to remind each other of some of the issues which might be affected by memory bias as IPA is dependent on how participants recall some of their experiences.

A partner's nonverbal reactions, when one of them is responding, act as minimal encouragers for the other partner. The nonverbal cues also serve to guide the interviewer in exploring certain areas more fully. Some cues even cause the person who is talking to add more information.

Individual partners sometimes ask each other questions regarding certain experiences that the researcher might not have thought of. For an example, one participant asked his partner the following question, "Does it ever come to your mind that you should leave me?" Another partner asked, "What were you thinking in that period when you moved out of the main bedroom?" One of the other participants asked the partner to share with me why he always returned home late drunk. These are questions that I would have failed to ask if I was conducting individual interviews as most of the probes are dependent on what the participants are saying.

How couples interact with each other during the discussion provided me with an in-depth understanding of the intracouple relationship with regards to gender issues, intimidation, and power inequality, which is absent in interviews with individuals. Similar strengths were documented by Bjørnholt and Farstad (2012).

Weaknesses Related to the Couple Interview

Although the couple interview has several strengths, this data collection method has its weaknesses. One of the major weaknesses is the influence of gender inequality such as where male partners seem to intimidate their female partners. Although female partners spoke a lot in the interview, it was apparent that they were focusing mainly on positive experiences and on praising their partners. Negative experiences were only mentioned when talking about the members of the extended family, church, or society. Those females who tried to share some negative experiences in their lives with their partners were

mostly cut short by statements such as "tell her what you did" in a harsh and threatening voice and the participants would end up saying "let's leave it." Although I tried to probe, the female participants would insist "let's not talk about it." From that moment onward, only the male partner would respond freely to the questions while the female became more reserved and more conscious about how she responded.

The interview sparked a lot of negative emotions such as blame, guilt, embarrassment, and shame. It was always tempting to offer counseling or advice instead of continuing with the interview while recognizing the emotions and showing empathy. Interviewers using IPA should refrain from offering counseling, advice, and therapy (Breakwell, 2012). However, Smith (2014) mentions that using counseling skills may be useful in an IPA interview. The researcher's view is to try and address immediate emotions without going into in-depth counseling as it may change the whole interview process into a counseling session.

It is also challenging to encode some of the nonverbal cues expressed by participants despite using probes to gain clarification. This can happen despite several attempts by the researchers to negotiate the meaning of nonverbal communication as highlighted by Smith (2014). The question, "I have seen that you raised your eyebrows when your partner was talking about sexual intimacy, let's discuss this," usually leads to the response, especially if the participant is female, "no, there was nothing." The challenge presented by suspended information is also identified by Bjørnholt and Farstad (2012). They maintain that most of the information is discussed with the researcher by an individual partner only after the formal couple interview.

Another challenge relates to cultural practices. One of the couples interviewed, originally from Vhembe district (part of the former Venda homeland), the wife stated that she felt uncomfortable about the way the chairs were arranged. It made her feel as if she were competing with her husband, which is culturally not allowed. She preferred being seated on the carpet or at least on a chair lower than her husband's chair. The same gender and cultural dynamics also arose again later during the couple interview when she repeatedly asked for permission from the husband to respond to some sensitive questions such as aspects of intimacy and plans for having children.

Recommendations

In order to curb some of the weaknesses of the couple interview, postcouple interviews in the form of individual face-to-face interviews should be conducted to explore the suspended or even missed issues (Bjørnholt & Farstad, 2012). It is important to debrief participants both as couples and as individuals. The sitting arrangement should be adjusted based on the individual couple's preference. Their cultural beliefs with regard to the sitting position and order of participation among couples need to be taken into account. The couple interview should preferably be conducted by an interviewer who is knowledgeable about the phenomenon studied to be able to use relevant

probes. It is preferable that the interviewer is knowledgeable about different cultural dynamics to avoid cultural shock and potential impact on the quality of the data collected.

Conclusions

The couple interview is a valuable data collection tool when researchers explore sensitive issues, which directly affect the relationship of a couple. The technique has several strengths that can enhance the depth and quality of data, which cannot be collected through individual interviews. The partner interaction during the interview process can provide researchers with directions for the interview as it provides clues regarding the probes to be used.

However, the couple interview has its own weaknesses. Some of the weaknesses are related to gender as well as cultural and power dynamics, which can cause the type of information to be completely biased due to domination by one of the partners. Some participants may use the interview session as an opportunity to vent their anger and other emotions that have been suppressed. If the interviewer is not experienced in handling those emotions, the entire interview develops into a counseling session.

Limitation

The participants in the study were only homogeneous in as far as they lived together in HIV-serodiscordant relationships but did not have the same ethnic and cultural background. This may have an impact on the outcome of the whole process and also the aspects, which are considered weaknesses for the couple interview as a method of data collection.

Authors' Note

Professor P. T. Sandy and Ms. Loraine Lelaka have contributed to the main studies on the experiences of HIV-serodiscordant couples.

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